

Seebohm's Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe seebohmi* in West Africa

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Le Traquet de Seebohm *Oenanthe oenanthe seebohmi* en Afrique de l'Ouest. Le Traquet de Seebohm *Oenanthe o. seebohmi*, généralement traité comme une sous-espèce du Traquet moiteux *O. oenanthe* malgré ses traits morphologiques distinctifs, niche exclusivement dans les zones montagnardes du Maroc et de l'Algérie. Son aire d'hivernage est mal connue. En février–mars 2007, nous avons étudié la présence des espèces de traquet le long d'un transect est-ouest dans la zone sahélienne et avons rencontré le Traquet de Seebohm régulièrement et en bon nombre depuis le sud de la Mauritanie jusqu'à l'ouest du Mali, entre 09°W et 14°W. Nous soupçonnons qu'un pourcentage important de sa population hiverne dans cette zone et traverse le Sahara chaque année.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* has one of the largest ranges among passerines. It breeds from Europe to eastern Siberia and north-west Africa, and from Iceland, Greenland and north-east Canada to Alaska. All of these populations winter mainly in Africa, south of the Sahara (Keith *et al.* 1992). The subspecies *seebohmi* (Seebohm's Wheatear) breeds exclusively in the mountains of north-west Africa and differs considerably from the other forms in plumage, vocalisations and morphology (Cramp & Perrins 1988). In Morocco it is a common breeder throughout the Middle and High Atlas, above 1,500 m, and more rarely in the Rif and the hills of eastern Morocco (Thévenot *et al.* 2003). In Algeria it is known to breed in the Aurès at 1,700–2,320 m and in the Djurdjura at 1,500–2,100 m (Isenmann & Moali 2000). Breeding has not been observed in Tunisia (Isenmann *et al.* 2005). Male Seebohm's

Wheatears possess a characteristic black throat and black underwing-coverts and axillaries, which separates them from other Northern Wheatear taxa (Cramp & Perrins 1988, Keith *et al.* 1992, Borrow & Demey 2001). The taxonomic status of Seebohm's Wheatear is unclear (Collar 2005).

Although *seebohmi* was previously thought to be a resident or only a partial migrant by some authors (e.g. Smith 1971, Hollom *et al.* 1988, Cramp & Perrins 1988), it is now considered a migrant, with the majority of the population leaving Morocco and Algeria in winter (Isenmann & Moali 2000, Thévenot *et al.* 2003). Browne (1982) found a major wintering area, roughly estimated to hold at least 50,000 individuals, in the eastern part of south-west Mauritania, between 16–19°N and 12–16°30'W. There are also three more southern records, from Djoudj National Park, in north-west Senegal (Rodwell *et al.* 1996). However, the winter distribution of Seebohm's

Table 1. Sympatric wheatear *Oenanthe* species observed and trapped in Mali and Mauritania at different locations in March 2007.

Tableau 1. Spécimens d'espèces de traquet *Oenanthe* sympatriques observés et capturés au Mali et en Mauritanie en différentes localités en mars 2007.

	Mali		Mauritania		
	NE of Nioro 15°22.218'N 9°25.742'W	W of Ayuen 16°25.944'N 10°21.403'W	Massif de Bellar 17°02.307'N 11°58.859'W	NE of Lac Aleg 17°17.667'N 13°42.688'W	Lac Aleg 17°05.206'N 13°58.504'W
site number (see map)	1	2	3	4	5
Date	7–8 March	9–11 March	11–12 March	12–13 March	13–14 March
number of birds observed (trapped) / site					
Northern Wheatear <i>O. oenanthe</i>	24 (6)	15 (6)	19 (3)	17 (14)	10 (0)
Seebohm's Wheatear <i>O. o. seebohmi</i>	3 (2)	4 (2)	3 (2)	5 (3)	2 (0)
Black-eared Wheatear <i>O. h. hispanica / melanoleuca</i>	12 (5)	5 (4)	5 (3)	4 (3)	2 (1)
Isabelline Wheatear <i>O. isabellina</i>	2 (0)		4 (2)		
White-crowned Black Wheatear <i>O. leucopyga</i>		6 (2)	4 (2)		

Wheatear east of this area still is unknown, apart from a few observations in the Tombouctou/Gossi area, in Mali (Lamarche 1981).

In February–March 2007 we undertook field work in West Africa’s Sahel zone, to investigate the occurrence of sympatric wheatear species, and here present our results at the five sites where we found Seebohm’s Wheatear.

Methods

We followed an east–west transect from 08°E to 14°W from Zinder, Agadez and Niamey, Niger, to Gao, Mopti and Bamako, Mali, from where we drove north into Mauritania, then heading west to Lac Aleg. Along this route we checked 20 randomly selected waypoints (GPS) with high wheatear abundance, for the presence of Northern Wheatear, Seebohm’s Wheatear and other wheatears (Isabelline Wheatear *O. isabellina*, Black-eared Wheatear *O. (h.) hispanicalmelanoleuca*, White-crowned Black Wheatear *O. leucopyga*). Each study site covered *c.*10 ha, where we counted all wheatears present. Using clap traps baited with mealworms, we trapped birds within these areas for 1–2 days, between 06.00 and 11.00 hrs. Twenty traps per site were used.

Results

In total we observed 17 Seebohm’s Wheatears at the five westernmost study sites, between 09°W and 14°W (Table 1; Fig. 1). Due to the difficulty of identifying females subspecifically in the field,

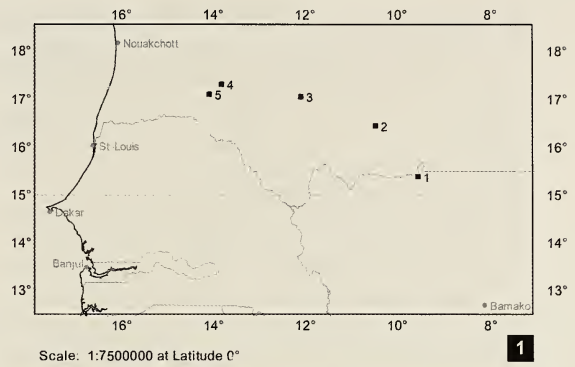


Figure 1. Trapping sites in Mali and Mauritania with *O. o. seebohmi* present.

Sites de capture au Mali et en Mauritanie où *O. o. seebohmi* était présent.

Figures 2–3. Male Seebohm’s Wheatears *O. o. seebohmi*, north-east of Nioro, Mali, March 2007 (B. Metzger)

Traquet de Seebohm *O. o. seebohmi*, mâles, nord-est de Nioro, Mali, mars 2007 (B. Metzger)

Figure 4. Presumed female Seebohm’s Wheatear *O. o. seebohmi* with typical blackish underwing-coverts and axillaries, Massif de Bellar, Mauritania, March 2007 (M. Förschler)

Traquet de Seebohm *O. o. seebohmi*, présumé femelle, avec les couvertures sous-alaires et les axillaires typiquement noirâtres, Massif de Bellar, Mauritanie, mars 2007 (M. Förschler)

all observed birds were males (Figs. 2–3). We captured seven males and two presumed *seebohmi* females, based on their remarkably dark underwing and axillaries (Fig. 4). Of the trapped individuals, five were adults and four second calendar-year birds. Approximately 12% of all wheatears observed and 18% of those captured at the sampling sites were of the race *seebohmi*. Captured birds had low to moderate subcutaneous fat deposits and five were moulting the body-feathers, indicating that they were still on their wintering grounds and not yet on spring migration. Apart from birds observed or trapped at the five study sites, we counted c.40 male Seebohm's Wheatears from the moving vehicle between study sites 1 and 5, which indicates a rather high abundance in this area.

Discussion

Our data on Seebohm's Wheatear, which we recorded regularly and in significant numbers in southern Mauritania and western Mali, between 13°58'W and 09°25'W, fill a gap in the knowledge of its winter distribution east of 12°W (see Browne 1982). The majority of this taxon's population appears to winter immediately south of the Sahara, in the Sahel zone of southern Mauritania, northern Senegal and north-west Mali between 15–18°N and 09–16°W, although its wintering grounds may range even further east, including parts of central Mali.

Acknowledgements

Our work was supported by DFG (Ba816/15). Kailou Moussa and Issoufou Zakoye kindly assisted our field work, whilst Joost Brouwer, Ben Koks, Abdoullaye Harouna and Bourama Niagate supported our excursion's preparation. Ron Demey and Volker Salewski proffered constructive comments on the manuscript.

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Received 5 December 2007; revision accepted 10 January 2008.